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TAGS: [KFRD](#) [CVIS](#) [SMIG](#) [HO](#)
SUBJECT: VULNERABILITIES OF HONDURAN IDENTITY DOCUMENTS

REF: 07 TEGUCIGALPA 917

Classified By: Ambassador Charles Ford. Reasons 1.4(b) & (d)

11. (SBU) Summary: Despite significant progress in improving the security of document issuance systems and the physical integrity of Honduran passports and national identification (ID) cards, serious vulnerabilities remain. Low salaries at Honduran Immigration and the National Registry of Persons (RNP), a strong market for false identities in the country, and a failure to comprehend the importance of ID document security mean individual employees at these institutions facilitate the issuance of fraudulent documents on a frequent basis. The RNP has conducted anti-fraud investigations recently, and Immigration is embroiled in a public scandal over improperly issued visas to Cubans, so many corrupt officials may be temporarily deterred. But without a comprehensive program to professionalize both services and a profound change in the attitude of many in the Government of Honduras (GOH) towards alien smuggling, Honduran ID documents will remain a vulnerability to the national security of Honduras and the United States. End Summary

Problems with ID Cards

12. (C) The Honduran National Registry of Persons (RNP) produces identification cards needed by all Honduran citizens to vote in elections and to perform basic day-to-day functions, like opening a bank account. The ID cards are based on birth certificates issued by the over 200 national registry offices. Historically, a birth certificate was a hand-written document, the number of which was recorded by hand in a large folio held at the local office registry, then transferred later to the central registry in Tegucigalpa. The RNP has worked diligently in recent years to digitalize both the production of birth certificates and the records of old hand-written certificates, while the process of issuing the ID cards on which they are based is completely electronic. The cards themselves are reasonably secure from tampering, and contain biometric information of their holders. The Embassy's Consular Section has obtained remote access to the RNP's database for anti-fraud purposes, so even cleverly executed forgeries and alterations can be detected by a check against the centrally held data.

13. (C) However, the system remains vulnerable to meddling by corrupt RNP officials in cahoots with alien smugglers, narco-traffickers, and other organized crime elements. Registrars and registry employees, especially in cities outside Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, operate with little or no supervision, and are not connected electronically to the central registry or RNP databases. Data on birth

certificates issued at those offices is collected periodically and taken for entry into those databases, but documents issued fraudulently can go undetected for lengthy periods, if they are ever detected. Similarly, though access to the RNP system is password-controlled, corrupt RNP employees can issue documents under stolen or fraudulent identities with relative impunity by using generic or stolen passwords, or simply because there's no way for supervisors to know the IDs are fraudulent. These are not just cases of people hiding previous visa refusals: notorious Guatemalan narco-trafficker Jorge Mario Paredes-Cordova, arrested in Honduras last week and now facing charges in the U.S., had a valid Honduran ID card. Recent efforts by the RNP directors, with the cooperation of the RNP employees, union, to identify cases of false IDs have born fruit, with several former RNP staff now facing criminal proceedings. However, a strong push from the Embassy was required for the Public Ministry to proceed with the investigation and prosecution of the cases, even in the face of overwhelming evidence of wrongdoing. Unfortunately, this may be a reflection of another weakness of the RNP: the appointment of nearly every employee based on political affiliation and loyalty.

14. (C) As the entity charged with providing IDs to voters, the RNP has long been staffed to balance the political power of the two major parties. Party loyalists, and friends and family members of political figures, almost all of whom are unqualified for their positions, make up the staff of the RNP at all levels. The RNP even has two directors, one from each of the two major parties (Liberal and National). Because of the necessity of having an ID card in order to vote, the RNP is also exposed to political shenanigans that weaken its security. Recently, the Zelaya administration has declined to fund the RNP at the level required for it to process the IDs of hundreds of thousands of new voters in what appears to be a cynical attempt to derail elections. Funds were allocated by the Congress, but the Finance Ministry has only disbursed funds for salaries and rent. As of this week, the RNP finds itself unable to fix the machine used to produce cards (the maintenance contract ran out and they did not have enough funds to purchase a new contract) or to order new supplies of plastic and laminate. In addition, a Congressionally-approved decree converting the RNP into a national security entity,⁸ which would eliminate the union, guarantee funding and provide for non-political staffing, has languished unsigned by the President since November 2007. In the absence of the President's signature, the President of Congress could choose to publish the decree himself, which would make it law, but he has declined to do so as he does not want to clash with the Executive.

And With Passports, Too

15. (C) Reforms to strengthen Honduran passports have been undertaken as well, but similar problems remain. Passport books are very secure and difficult to alter. Passport databases are electronically connected to those of the RNP, and no passport is issued without a confirmation of the applicant's ID. But, again, an identity card issued based on a fraudulently issued birth certificate merely propagates a false identity, now extended to a travel document. As with ID cards, Honduran passports are issued improperly by underpaid Immigration officials tempted by bribes or intimidated by threats. Former Head of Immigration German Espinal told Embassy officials of frequent death threats against him for his reform efforts, and has recounted harrowing tales of kidnappings of immigration officials and their families in efforts to coerce the improper issuance of passports. In addition, Honduran consular officials at posts overseas, often political appointees who see their jobs as money-making sinecures, are accused of overcharging for passports or, conceivably, issuing them in false identities.

&Cubanazo8 Highlights Immigration Weaknesses

16. (C) A recent expose dubbed the "Cubanazo" on smuggling

Cubans by high-level Honduran government officials and other well-connected Hondurans has highlighted both the vulnerability of the country's immigration system and the levels to which trafficking influence has reached. In an ongoing series of articles, conservative daily *El Heraldo* has brought to light several cases in which GOH officials (from government ministers to city mayors) have requested Honduran visas be issued to Cuban *experts* coming to the country to provide technical assistance. These *experts* included a group whose visas were requested by the deputy chief of the National Institute of Property coming to advise the GOH on procedures for documenting private property. Another group included an *expert* who was 14-years-old. In some cases, the visa requests have been denied, but in others, Immigration and the MFA have expedited the requests. Some groups that have arrived and been detained have, on several occasions, been released upon the vehement insistence of prominent Hondurans who arrived at Immigration facilities to take custody of them. The owner of a San Pedro Sula television channel, Faisal Sikaffy, reportedly indignantly announced he had been bringing Cubans here *for years*. DHS/ICE confirmed that more than half of those in the group released to him appeared in the United States only days later.

¶7. (C) As a result of the *Cubanazo*, the Head of Immigration and the Secretary General of the Foreign Ministry, both good Embassy contacts, have placed their resignations *at the disposal of the President*. The President has not accepted the resignations pending the outcome of an official investigation, but neither official is allowed into his office for now. The Honduran Consul in Havana has resigned his position and is facing investigation by the Public Ministry.

¶8. (C) The Embassy has worked to keep the issue of Honduran identity document security in the public eye. The Ambassador was recently caricatured in one paper as sleepless over the thought of a terrorist using a Honduran ID to obtain a U.S. immigration benefit, and *El Heraldo's* investigation stemmed in part from recent background briefings following the revocation for alien smuggling of a GOH official's U.S. visa. At a recent lunch, Foreign Minister Orellana told the Ambassador he was losing sleep over ID security as well, but many in the government seem unconcerned about the issue, except as it applies to their own U.S. visa eligibility.

What Can We Do?

¶9. (C) Comment: Through the anti-fraud working group reported reftel, the Consular Section will continue to pressure the Public Ministry to move forward with prosecutions of officials involved in document ID fraud, and will monitor closely the results of the investigation into the *Cubanazo*. The deterrent effect of successful prosecution in such cases is strong; even public exposure under suspicion of such action is powerful, resulting in administrative action and dismissal. Politically, the Embassy has publicly urged the GOH to provide sufficient funding for the RNP and Immigration, and privately urged members of the Executive to move ahead with the decree converting both offices into national security entities. (Note: In a May 13 meeting, one of the RNP Director's reported that they had reached an agreement with the Executive on funding. End note.) The Consular Section is planning a series of anti-fraud training seminars for all of Honduras, registrars, and an approach to the head of the RNP union to enlist her organizations, support in the fight against corrupt employees. The Embassy is also supporting the RNP in its acquisition of a fingerscan log-in system, similar to the Department's, to prevent misuse of passwords. In addition, the RNP and Immigration are both planning the formation of internal investigations units, and will be seeking Embassy donations of equipment and training. The Embassy will continue publicly to support officials who have demonstrated a commitment to genuine reform.

¶10. (C) Beyond that, the Embassy is considering a series of

stronger moves to encourage the GOH at all levels to acknowledge the seriousness of ID fraud, including the revocations of U.S. visas for alien smuggling of high-level officials allegedly involved in Cuban and Special Interest Alien smuggling, and to publicly announce that all Honduran IDs presented along with visa applications will have to be checked by the Embassy against original Honduran birth records held at one of the 280 registries around the country, resulting in extensive delays in visa processing. Post is also considering reducing the validity of U.S. visas issued, and, to send a message to the most influential, requiring the personal appearance of GOH officials at visa interviews. Given the sensitivity of the Honduran government and public to U.S. visas, it's possible that even just announcing such moves would be sufficient to spur action. However, the temporary suspension of scheduling visa interviews two years ago in response to the immediate release from prison of two Cameroonians who bought their Honduran passports resulted in a great deal of media attention and not much else. The practice continues and threatens our national security. End Comment.

Ford